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ABSTRACT

Noting that education is viewed as the route to success in American society, the paper argues that education has not lived up to this promise. Emphasis on conformity and regimentation, fostering of competition and exclusion behaviors, classism, racism, and a microfocal perspective of social problems serve as barriers to full realization of the potential of American education. The system serves those who wish to maintain the social structure, but it has great potential to serve a wider group if educators and others work together to transmit the information, values, and understanding necessary for a healthy society. A system of community education is proposed that is based on teamwork that coordinates all of a community's learning resources and brings them to bear upon all of the community's learning needs. (Author/M7)

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COMMUNITY TEAMWORK IN EDUCATION FOR TOMORROW

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Abstract of
Community Teamwork in
Education for Tomorrow

The author notes that education has been popularly viewed as the route to success in American society. The fact that it has not lived up to this promise is identified as being related to problems within and external to educational systems. These include emphasis on conformity and regimentation, the fostering of competition and exclusion behaviors, reinforcement of classism, and a microfocal perspective of social problems. Such behaviors have served as formidable barriers to the full realization of the potential of education in American society.

Although the system has traditionally served those who wish to maintain the prevailing social structure, it has great potential for significant impact on individuals, groups, organizations and communities. Educators and other professionals and nonprofessionals, in informal as well as formal learning environments throughout our communities can work together to provide leadership in transmitting the information, values, and understanding necessary for a healthy society. The author proposes a community education model based on knowledgeable teamwork which provides for bringing all of the learning resources of communities to bear upon all of the learning needs of communities.

The Problem Issues in Education

A great amount of time in the lives of American children and youth is spent in a formal learning environment. In increasing numbers adults from every stratum of society are also involved in some form of educational endeavor. It may be the community college, a state university, a vocational program, an adult education class, or in-service training on the job in human service organizations or industry. Education is certainly not the answer to all of the concerns or worries brought by people to these classrooms. Nevertheless, it is viewed as a way of improving oneself and of increasing one's potential.

Every immigrant group, in attempting to move from an initial position of poverty and powerlessness to one of greater strength and autonomy, has counted heavily on political influence and education as the route to these goals. Somehow, in spite of the fact that many view it as a failing system, education remains the hope of individuals and groups who are struggling to improve their lives. It is seen as a way to finally break away from the strain of attempting to stretch a low income in the face of an ever-inflating economy. Often it is viewed as a means of finding oneself, a final hope to a firm identity. Thomas Sowell, author of Black Education, Myths and Tragedies, shares his experiences struggling through night school as a young adult who had earlier dropped out of high school:

"Many a night as I dragged myself home from school, I wondered if I should stop kidding myself and give it up. But I couldn't. I kept going for the same reason that people keep playing the numbers . . . an unwillingness to surrender that last feeble hope that something good will happen."

Black community leaders, who see employment and underemployment as the number one issue in the Black community at present, link this devastating

problem to that of deficient education. John H. Johnson of Johnson Publishing Co., feels that full and complete equality in education will pave the way to a better life for all minorities.² The executive director of the Chicago Urban League, James W. Compton, makes the observation that Black children must be taught to identify with mothers, fathers, teachers, and other professionals (not the negative albeit "successful" images they see often in the street).³

A few years ago, I had the good fortune to be a member of the audience at a lecture given by the renowned anthropologist, Ashley Montagu. He spoke on a favorite topic, "The Natural Superiority of Women." In a comment about educational institutions, he stated that these are places where instruction takes place, not education. It was his opinion that it is very difficult, nigh impossible for real learning of useful skills and knowledge to take place within the halls of academia. There is much truth to this statement. The best opportunities to acquire information, effectively integrate it, to analyze, and to put it into practice often come outside of the classroom. James Herndon, in his book The Way It Spoized To Be, notes the failure of school for the bulk of the pupil population, not just for the poor or minority pupil. Along with other observers of the educational scene, he sees middle-class children as learning outside of the classroom much of what they need to succeed in society, an option not available to most low income children. Also, they often accept patterns of conformity and behavior more readily than lower class children because they can link these behaviors to feasible goals. Consequently, they appear to be actually learning in school, when in reality this may not be the case.⁴

Some good things do happen in classrooms. The motivation to reach out and extend oneself as a student, to explore the meaning of a book, a class lecture, or a discussion beyond school rooms, can come about as a result of

what happens between the educator and the students. Unfortunately, such happy circumstances seem to occur less frequently than we would prefer, and not just in urban schools.

In a vein similar to that of Montagu, Paul Goodman, in the early 1960's, made the observation that our American public schools have had a tremendously democratizing effect on this large multi-cultural society of ours. He cautioned us though, to be careful, to reassess them, as under changing conditions, the schools can become a universal trap and democracy begins to look like regimentation.⁵

The following excerpts from "The Little Boy," a poem by Helen Buckley, reveal how regimentation and stifling of originality and individuality can occur in schools.⁶

One morning
When the little boy had been in school
a while
The teacher said
"Today we are going to make a picture"
"Good" thought the little boy
He liked to make pictures
He could make all kinds
Lions, and tigers
Chickens, and cows
trains, and boats
And he took out his box of crayons
and began to draw.

But the teacher said "Wait!"
"It is not time to begin"
And she waited until everybody looked ready.

"Now" said the teacher
"We are going to make flowers"
"Good" thought the little boy
He liked to make flowers
And he began to make beautiful ones
With his pink and orange and blue crayons.

But the teacher said, "Wait!"
"And I will show you how."
And it was red, with a green stem.
"There," said the teacher
"Now you may begin."

The little boy looked at the teacher's flower
Then he looked at his own flower.
He liked his flower better than the teacher's
But he did not say this.
He just turned his paper over
And made a flower like the teacher's
It was red, with a green stem.

The poem continues on, with the boy having similar experiences working with clay and making other things. He learned to wait and to make it like the teacher's. One day he moved and went to a new school. Buckley continues,

And the very first day
He was there,
"Today we are going to make a picture."
"Good!" thought the little boy,
And he waited for the teacher
To tell him what to do,
But the teacher didn't say anything.
She just walked around the room.

When she came to the little boy
She said, "Don't you want to make a picture?"
"Yes," said the little boy
"What are we going to make?"
"I don't know until you make it," said the teacher.
"How shall I make it?" asked the little boy.
"Why, any way you like," said the teacher.

"Any color?" said the little boy.
"Any color," said the teacher.
"If everyone made the same picture,
And used the same colors,
How would I know who made what,
And which was which?"
"I don't know," said the little boy.
And he began to make a red flower with a green stem.

All too often, children have this type of experience in schools. Historically, low income and minority children have been especially subject to this dampening of their creativity and uniqueness.

It is recognized today that the problems of minorities and the poor in American society must be attacked on all fronts if they are to be resolved to any appreciable degree. We must also recognize that the problems of all Americans are interrelated. The unemployed, educationally deficient youth,

who resorts to crime affects many more than those from whom he may steal. The repercussions are almost unending. Why not spend the relatively few dollars it might take to prevent such losses to his family, community, the victim, and the state which must incarcerate him? Harold Wilensky points out that to effect a decrease in differences between rich and poor, young and old, minority and majority peoples in the arena of health and welfare, is a clear and direct contribution to absolute equality.⁷ Ultimately, it is also the least costly socially, psychologically, and economically.

Some theorists identify the political arena as a target for greater efforts to increase the participation of disadvantaged people in American society. Such efforts would include removing minorities and low income people from continued political isolation, fostering coalitions, and advocating for greater and more meaningful participation of these groups in political institutions.⁸ Current efforts in the area of voter registration attest to a belief in the viability of political power. History also provides confirmation of the effect of use of the ballot on the political strength of various groups.

It is particularly in the area of the nation's education effort, it seems, that a major contribution can be made toward the goal of equality of opportunity, toward a more positive, healthy, even politically strong society. This has long been almost a sacred belief held by persons and groups throughout American society, from the poorest, functionally illiterate individual to the complex, technologically advanced corporation. However, problems in educational systems have been massive and are becoming more so. We must identify effective ways to create a system of high quality learning environments for all groups. It is a problem of establishing a system which fosters relevant learning of usable information and skills, and the understanding of how to continue this kind of learning throughout one's life. It is also one of maintaining such a system to relate equally well to the tremendous diversity of age, sex, race, ethnicity, religion and other interests.

Barriers to Social Progress

The author has functioned professionally as a deliverer of direct social work services as well as an educator. In both arenas there have been close encounters with systems whose dysfunctioning threatened the lives of individuals and families. Such experiences led the author to theorize about four major areas of possible malfunctioning in nearly all societies. These become barriers to the full realization of the potential of major societal institutions, including education systems. They are:

1. Racism (classism, ethnic bias, etc.) with individual and institutional manifestations.
2. A microfocal perspective toward problem-solving.
3. The systematic (conscious and unconscious) suppression of a natural impulse toward creativity and freedom of expression.
4. The systematic (conscious and unconscious) suppression of a natural cooperative orientation to others.

The above barriers or areas of malfunctioning are, in large part, a result of tendencies in a society to emphasize negative, exclusion modes of adaptation, which aid in justifying, rationalizing, and maintaining a system which benefits a fortunate few. Thus, women, youth, racial minorities, the poor, and even those with average incomes are locked into stifling experiences and environments. American society has no monopoly on these four behavioral modes. We find them existing throughout the world in varying degrees. They are historically ancient behaviors, perhaps primordial. Although they may provide a form of stability, they are inherently negative and destructive. The stability is a brittle one, subject to cracks or sudden collapse, as in the riots of the 1960's, the war protest of the 1970's, and the cynicism of the 1980's.

On the other side of the coin there are behaviors and attitudes which

counter those discussed above. They are also familiar ways of responding to other people and to social needs as they normally emerge in all societies. They include:

1. Tolerance and respect for difference and the benefits accruing to oneself and one's group from the dynamic impact of differences.
2. A macrofocal perspective toward personal and social change without labeling certain individuals, groups, or institutions as "sick."
3. A loving, flexible use of self, responsive to the humanity in all, respectful of the individuality of the other.
4. The desire to work together, the ability to pool skills and commitments, with a heterogeneous group.

These behavioral modes are also natural, logical, human responses to the coexistence of people with one another. They reflect a desire to include rather than to exclude others. Both tendencies, the negative and the positive, exist in all of us. Some societies emphasize and support one group of responses over the other. Some emphasize and reinforce the inclusion responses only at certain critical points, and often selectively. For example, a mobilization of all societal institutions and systems occurred in the United States during the depression. These included massive work relief programs and critical health and welfare measures. People were asked to and did, pull together. The same kind of internal mobilization of the United States occurred during World War II, when women, Black-Americans and even children were included and responded to in a more positive fashion than ever because their labor was needed. Yet, Americans were encouraged to hate Germans and Japanese; and after the war women and minorities were once more relegated to the leftovers, to tokenism. Is it only during wartime, when we join against an external foe, that we should be exhorted to pull together? Even the "Sputnik scare" resulting in frantic efforts to improve our

educational system in a time not long past, was connected to fear of Russian domination of space exploration. Our leaders need to realize that education is valued in American society, even by those who do not benefit appreciably from it, for reasons other than a foreign threat. It has been viewed as the route to upward mobility, the cutting edge of social change. However, although it has served to enhance the lives of many people, it has not provided that massive redistribution of income or social change envisioned by certain social theorists.¹⁰ Although they have the potential to strongly influence social change, educational systems have not done the job. They have not been successful precisely because they have been so useful as a way of maintaining the status quo. They have fostered competitive exclusion behaviors rather than cooperation and inclusion. One characteristic of systems is inertia and resistance to change, more so in a complex bureaucratic structure which serves the useful function of keeping things as they are.

In fact there has been a solid and continuous connection between education and the existing occupational structure. Education has served the needs of the social structure by fulfilling a basic sorting and socializing function. The children of the wealthy and middle classes are sorted for certain careers and jobs, and the poor for others.¹¹ It may surprise us to realize that a very few escape the pattern. As a result of this status quo orientation, in much of the literature on social change education may not be mentioned at all as a way of accomplishing change. It is not treated seriously as the viable change vehicle it could be.

A Potential Force For Change:
A Community Concept

In spite of this rather depressing picture, the author believes that formal education systems and educational processes have fantastic potential to impact the society in extremely significant and positive ways. The basic required resources are already there: the desire of people for more information, skills and understanding about themselves and the world. The time is available, especially of children and youth in a compulsory system; and in increasing numbers, others in the population have more time and motivation for learning experiences, including retraining. We have the space, the personnel, the technology, the knowledge and the skill to provide useful learning for students of all types. What is missing is a firm and unwavering commitment to activating and realizing this potential in the form of a strong comprehensive national educational policy reflected in strong educational systems at the local level. Such a national educational policy, reflecting such a commitment, would provide the necessary funding, expertise and support for workable educational programs throughout the country. It would embody a recognition that education cannot occur through a monolithic exclusive formal structure; that it must involve coordination, cooperation, and integration with other community systems, both formal and informal. Educational policy must be responsive to and respectful of local needs and interests. Governmental priorities must reflect a recognition that the interests of society lie in this direction, that reordering priorities to support and sustain a national effort has import for the survival and growth of our society. Extensive funding for example, must come from other sources besides the typical property tax base or referendums, which ensure that poor communities do not receive the quantity or quality of materials, equipment, or staff enjoyed by higher income communities. Individuals and groups too, at the local level,

must be willing to make sacrifices and to demonstrate a commitment to their communities. In the face of drastic budget cuts, the voluntary contributions of skilled professionals and of lay people will be critical.

The writer firmly believes that instruction which imparts relevant and valid information to people is a beginning step toward influencing desirable transformations in attitudes, behavior and abilities. Other crucial aspects of the educational process such as the provision of opportunities to "practice" using new information, and positive human interactions with peers and teachers, can together with useful instruction provide great benefit to entire communities. Not isolating the school from other community institutions, but establishing close linkages with them has been found to foster a more dynamic, involved, harmonious community and school environment. There must be an open recognition of the role which the school, as a formal institution, can play to constructively influence other learning programs and processes in the community. In the school and in other learning environments, both formal and informal, we can work to discover more effective ways to prevent exclusion behavioral patterns, and their negative consequences.

In Change in School Systems, edited by Goodwin Watson, there is a statement to the effect that if one system in our society can take the risk of scrutinizing itself closely, and can rigorously work to correct its own dysfunctions, other societal systems may follow.¹² Might this not be the case with our educational systems which are so pervasive, so tightly interwoven in the fabric of all our lives?

Directions for Change

A focus on systems change ought to be an integral part of the instruction of future educational professionals. This should involve learning how to approach

school, family, and community problems from a macrofocal rather than a microfocal perspective.

Of course, there are pupils in our schools who are seriously disturbed or maladjusted. There are individuals and families who need counseling. They can benefit from skillful clinical approaches. However, as a primary model this has been clearly revealed as inefficient and ineffective. Yet, the individual, therapy-oriented approach is all too often the only response to the social as well as academic problems which erupt in schools. The temptation is to put a heavy portion of the blame for problems on home and neighborhood environments, or on individual character deficits.

We must face the fact that system dysfunctioning is often related to individual student behavior. Although we may suppose that a certain child is "sick" or particular groups of students are "bad" or incapable of learning, in reality certain system policies may set the stage for many of the negative behaviors observed in individuals. Matthew B. Miles identifies certain characteristics of schools which frequently contribute to student behavior problems as well as other system problems. As a major ill in schools, he cites moralism, value conflicts, financial emphasis, procedural rigidity, and lack of a systematically built-in research and development function.¹³

The author believes that educators are capable of a nondefensive recognition of such problems in schools.

Self-examination can be engaged in courageously by administrators, teachers, and other staff. It can involve the assessment of building, classroom, and district policies, procedures, or programs which may be having a negative effect on many, not just one or two, children. The next steps in problem-solving include utilizing the knowledge and skills of teachers, support personnel, parents, and yes, students. Coordinated efforts between educational and human service

agencies can be brought to bear to solve such system-wide and consequently community-wide problems as high drop-out rates, teenage pregnancies, functional illiteracy, and poor preparation for working competently in businesses, industries, and other organizations.

Educators, social workers, counselors and other professionals can also make an impact at the preservice level on students who seek to enter these fields. We can consciously transmit values which emphasize the capacity to work with others toward common goals and objectives, the ability to utilize effective problem-solving models, a readiness for self-evaluation, and an absence of bigotry. We can be as effective in this endeavor as we have been in fostering competition, grade consciousness, and individual success.

In work with students, communities, colleagues, and other professionals, educators can model the harmony we profess to value. This involves behavior which reflects:

1. Teamwork, especially with the interdisciplinary team.¹⁴
2. Knowledge of self, whether it be the individual or the system.
3. Ability to relate to and respect cultural, racial, and other differences.
4. Effective problem-solving skills.
5. A broad systems orientation, rather than on specific children, parents, families, or other individualized aspects of the environment.¹⁵
6. A recognition of the need for community education, wherein the learning needs of all in our communities are brought together with all of the resources in the community.

SUMMARY

The necessary changes in attitude and behavior to achieve coordinated, viable learning environments require hard day-to-day work including the sidelining, for a time, of "system ego." It is the belief of this writer that a resounding impact on society could come about through educational systems adopting these and other similar approaches. With the support of government bodies which incorporate this perspective into a strong national educational policy with a clear vision of its goals, our deteriorating educational systems could be turned around completely. Our communities could be affected positively.

The inability to work effectively together, the emphasis on the material, on the parts instead of the whole, on procedure rather than on people, our "blaming the victim" tendencies are problems existing in all of our social systems, not just education. Mental health, public welfare, medicine, and other institutions would benefit from a positive approach to learning, to working with others through coordination of all educational resources. If we can harness the available information, the know-how and the technology of all our learning systems, our entire society could be benefited. A social utility model can be developed of preventive education available to all, adequate to meet the broad spectrum of learning needs which evolve over the lifespan.

Concerned, knowledgeable, sensitive professionals and nonprofessionals have begun to come together in small cooperative interdisciplinary endeavors. Some have been successful. Nurses, social workers and teachers have developed some fine programs for pregnant teenage girls in several high schools in the nation. Parents, teachers, children and administrators use schools in Flint, Michigan as a resource for the total community. A community YMCA is housed in Governors State University in Illinois. The University has also joined hands with the community in planning its curriculum in educational technology, social

work, business and other areas. These beginnings can be expanded to include knowledgeable and skilled nonprofessionals, parents, young people, clergymen, industrialists, older skilled Americans, and others throughout the society. Perhaps it is too idealistic to expect people to pull together for humanistic systems, for equality of opportunity in education, and for high quality health care, vocational training, or a clean environment.

But what are the alternatives? Chaos or a police state? These might become our only options in the increasingly crowded, violent culture in which we live, where rich and poor become more and more separated from one another.

In 1948, the Civil Rights Congress petitioned the General Assembly of the United Nations, charging the United States with genocide against Black Americans. In the preface to the 1970 edition of the petition, Ossie Davis wrote:

Black labor is expendable, the American economy does not need it any more. What will a racist society do to a subject population for which it no longer has any use? Will America, in a sudden gush of reason, good conscience, and common sense reorder her priorities, revamp her institutions, clean them of racism so that Blacks and Puerto Ricans and American Indians and Mexican-Americans can be and will be fully and meaningfully included on an equal basis? Or, will America, grown meaner and more desperate as she confronts the just demands of her clamorous outcasts, choose genocide?¹⁶

In 1984, these words may apply not only to America's minorities, but also to the elderly, handicapped, the poor in the villages, on farms, on reservations, in the cities, the blue-collar worker, in fact the average American.

These questions must be answered, and they must be answered soon. I believe there is still time, for America to make the choice which will signal our decision for life, growth, and for hope for all our people. I believe enlightened educational policies and programs, both national and local, encompassing the many and varied learning experiences possible in our communities, can do much to set our nation on that path.

Footnotes

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